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### Special Issue On New Trends In Ecumenism

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# **Conversion, Marriage, and Gender: Jordanians and the Christian Mission.<sup>1</sup>**

*Willy Jansen*

## **Introduction**

From the middle of the nineteenth century onward, many Christian missionaries went to the Middle East. This mission was considered a difficult one. The Ottoman government strongly opposed proselytism among Muslims, and both Muslims and Jews were seen as practically unconvertible.<sup>2</sup> So all attention was focussed on the small local Christian community, especially Palestine, which was a concentration area of missionaries from all kinds of denominations. Each sought to gain a foothold in the Holy Land.

What was the effect of this multi-denominational missionary attention on the local population? Rather than looking at this from the perspective of the missionaries and the West, I will discuss the choices the people living across the river Jordan made out of the religions offered to them by the missionaries, and how they adapted religious practices and beliefs to their own culture. I will argue that local kinship organisation and marriage and divorce practices played a large role in the religious choices people made. This accounted for a great number of conversions and for the originally homogeneous group of Christians to split up into several churches. Rather than giving up their own kinship ideas and marriage preferences, people took advantage of the different marriage rules maintained by the various churches, and adapted their religion to fit their primary relations. In this conversion process women took a different role than men. I will indicate what this means for the agency of women in religious matters and for their religious identity.

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<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this article appeared in: Ad Borsboom and Jean Kommers (eds) *Anthropologists and the Missionary Endeavour. Experiences and Reflections* Saarbrücken: Verlag für Entwicklungspolitik Saarbrücken GmbH, 2000.

<sup>2</sup> Doumato 1989:2; Missiewerk 1922-23:25-26; Tibawi 1966:14-15.

The data for this article was collected during anthropological fieldwork in Husn, a religiously mixed community in Jordan, in 1989.<sup>3</sup> Apart from participant observation, interviews were held with religious leaders of the various churches, and local archives of the Roman Catholic Church (also called the Latin Church), which date back to 1885, were studied. I was only granted a quick look at the Anglican (from 1924 onwards), Greek Orthodox and Greek Catholic archives. During my stay in Husn, I lived with a Muslim family. For the historical background, I have also made use of material collected in the archives of missionary organisations in England (CMS, Jerusalem & East Mission) and the Catholic Documentation Centre in the Netherlands.

## **The growth of a multi-religious community**

Before discussing the relationship between the missionaries and the local population, let us first look at demographic developments to see how Husn became a religiously mixed community in a predominantly Muslim country in which less than five per cent of the population is Christian.<sup>4</sup> The first inhabitants of Husn were Muslims. The earliest written sources about the community, the Ottoman tax registers of 1596/97, reveal that at the end of the sixteenth century the village of Husn consisted of 39 peasant households who had as main source of income the dry farming of wheat, barley, summer crops, olives, and the raising of goats and sheep. All household heads were Muslims as the registers mention no poll tax, an additional tax for Christians and Jews which expressed their subjugation.<sup>5</sup>

The first Christians in Husn appear to be the Al Dyuk tribe, which claims to have settled there in the 1730s after leaving Tayba near Ramallah in Palestine.<sup>6</sup> A larger group of Christians arrived around 1775 from the

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<sup>3</sup> I want to express my gratitude to the staff of the Institute of Anthropology and Archaeology at Yarmouk University, Irbid, Jordan, for their support.

<sup>4</sup> Christians in Jordan live concentrated in a few pockets such as Madaba, Kerak, Ajlun, Husn, Irbid and smaller villages such as Smâkiya, Deir Rumeimîn, Nâ'ûr, Anjara, or quarters of Irbid, Zerqa, Mafrâq and Amman. The estimates of their number vary considerably. According to the census of 1961, Christians form a minority of 1.9 per cent of the total Jordanian population (FCPH 1963, p. 115). Barrett (1982, p. 427) gives an estimate of 5 per cent Christians among the Jordanian population.

<sup>5</sup> Hütteroth & AbdulFattah 1977, pp. 38 and 204.

<sup>6</sup> Peake 1958, vol. II, p. 158.

Northern Hauran where they suffered persecution. According to oral tradition, Sultan Abdel Hamîd in Constantinople had given them this land and had placed two Christian families to each Muslim family in this formerly empty desert. Other Christians came from Christian communities to the south and the east, such as Kerak, Madaba and Ajlun. Some were criminals fleeing prosecution, others fled from intratribal conflicts or were nomads who settled. Peake's description of the tribes of Jordan gives an indication of the wanderings of the Christians. Of the Al-Ghanamat tribe he says:

They originally lived at Fik in Syria after leaving Kerak. From there they went to Lebanon and then to Alal, finally settling in Husn. They are Christian Greek Orthodox.<sup>7</sup>

Through immigration, Christians slowly came to form about half of the population, and like the Al-Ghanamat tribe, all these settlers were Greek Orthodox. From the reports of Western travellers in this region, we can deduce this settlement process and the later religious diversification as a result of missionary activity.<sup>8</sup> In 1812 Burckhardt wrote that the population of Husn consisted of about one hundred families, of whom 25 were Greek Orthodox and the others were Muslims.<sup>9</sup> Seetzen, who arrived a little later, gave an estimation of 30 Greek Orthodox families.<sup>10</sup> The Christians increased in number, especially towards the end of the century. Already by 1881, Merrill noted 70 Greek Orthodox families and Schumacher, who visited Husn ten years later, counted 120 Christian families and 110 Muslim families from a total of 1,200 inhabitants.<sup>11</sup> By that time a conversion process of the originally Greek Orthodox inhabitants to Roman Catholicism and Anglicanism had already started.

A century later, in 1989, when I did my research, the population that had increased to 11,530 people, who were still largely dependent on agriculture. Muslims and Christians played an about equally prominent role in community life. The two large religious groups were mutually dependent in more than one aspect. During the century the Christians had managed to remain only slightly ahead of Muslims in number, in concentration of landed

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<sup>7</sup> Peake 1958, p. 58.

<sup>8</sup> See Jansen 1992.

<sup>9</sup> Burckhardt 1822, p. 268.

<sup>10</sup> Seetzen 1854-59, p. 361.

<sup>11</sup> Merrill 1881, p. 352; Schumacher 1893, p. 80 and Schumacher 1897, p. 174.

property and in economic and political power.<sup>12</sup> However, they also were ahead in the migration and emigration trend, as a result of which in recent years their number has started to dwindle. When adding the membership figures of the different Christian churches in 1989 – no exact figures on the religious composition on the population were available – I came to a total of 4,778 Christians. The Latin community consisted of 716 members according to the register, the Greek-Catholic Church had about 1200 members and the Anglican Church about 260 members according to estimates of their priests. The Seventh Day Adventists had only two members left – when the church closed in 1988 most parishioners had reconverted to Anglicanism. The newest group, the Baptists, attracted about 100 followers (my rough estimate, their leader refused an interview, but I counted 50 people at the service), mostly young people, and the oldest group, the Greek-Orthodox, still had 2,500 members according to its priest.

According to this estimate, Christians form less than half of the population of Husn, which would mean that their share has dwindled compared to the fairly reliable 54.5 per cent calculated in the population census of 1961.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, most people in town say that Christians still form a small majority, although Christians are the first to recognise their diminishing share. They know that Christians more often migrate abroad or to the big cities, while the Muslim population grows because Palestinian Muslims from the refugee camps settle into town.

## Crossing the boundaries

The above history shows that the Christians of Husn are autochthonous original Christians and not converted Muslims. The Christians of Husn are the descendants of the early Christians, whose history in the Middle East goes back to the beginning of the Christian era. Their long-term resistance to conversion to Islam proves that the boundaries between Islam and Christianity were kept under close guard. Some people must have crossed the boundary, and probably more Christians became Muslim than the other way around. However, these apostasies were hushed and as to their numbers we can only guess. Individual Christians who became Muslims left the Christian group and were then easily absorbed by the wider Muslim community. Local Greek

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<sup>12</sup> Abujaber 1989, p. 165-66 and 268.

<sup>13</sup> *First Census of Population and Housing* (FCPH), 18 November 1961. 1963

Orthodox leaders claim that some poor Muslim families of labourers in the past had shown allegiance to their landlords, by allowing their children to be baptised. It is not known whether such acts to secure relations of patronage were considered conversions by the parties involved.

In Husn, Greek Orthodox can be considered the indigenous Christian religion. Its priests were usually native to the town, although the church was paid for by the Orthodox Patriarchate in Jerusalem. The other Christian churches developed through missionary activity from the 1870s onwards. They depended heavily on European and American resources, and their work was not devoid of political interest. For instance, American missionaries in Palestine were ousted by the British who insisted on monopolising Protestant missionary activities, partly in order to counter the influence of the Catholic missionary presence supported by the French government and of the Orthodox church supported by the Russians.<sup>14</sup>

Elder men in Husn particularly remember the missionary 'Miss Joseph' who arrived after World War I and stayed until 1948. She was famous for the weekly 'salon' she held at her house where she read from the newspaper and the Bible. There men of all religions could discuss social, religious, and political matters. In retrospect, some villagers saw Miss Joseph as a tool of western colonialist penetration and held her politically suspect. Her elusive presence in the files of British missionary organisations – she is mentioned in letters home from missionaries and shows up in head counts, but she never belonged to the organisations she was said to belong to – supports the idea that she might have been a spy.

All the missionaries to Jordan came by way of nearby Palestine. At the height of missionary activity at the beginning of this century, the West Bank of the Jordan river attracted numerous Christian missions. The Roman Catholic mission alone had forty different orders working in Palestine; in 1914 these accounted for 800 priests and 500 nuns. To these the other Christian denominations added numerous other missionaries. Moreover, to solve the language and culture problem, local people were trained into missionary service. One commentator concluded that no country was so richly endowed with missionaries as Palestine, but probably no other mission bore so little fruit.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Bustami 1989, p. 9.

<sup>15</sup> Missiewerk 1922-23, p. 24.



Partly as a result of this 'over-missionization' of Palestine, several of these missions ventured across the river Jordan to reach out to the Christians on the eastern border. Husn received missionaries and in their wake the financial benefits from Palestine, Lebanon, Italy, the Netherlands, England and America. By 1879 Anglican and by 1885 Roman Catholic missionaries had arrived. In the following century, the Greek Orthodox Church lost its members to the Latins, Greek Catholics, Anglicans, Adventists, and Pentecostalists. The Roman Catholics began to build a church and a school in 1887. The large buildings were completed under the Dutch missionary Adrianus Smets (1867-1947).<sup>16</sup> At the age of eighteen he had come to Jerusalem to study at the Patriarchal Seminary. In 1892 he had become chaplain in Husn under the Italian priest Teobaldo Navoni, whose successor he became in 1897. He collected money in his hometown Dommelen in The Netherlands for the construction of the church and invited his painter-friend Piet Gerrits to decorate it.<sup>17</sup> Smets arranged for the Palestinian order of the Sisters of the Rosary to run the school. About the same time, in 1886, the Greek Orthodox Church was built and the Anglican Church followed in 1926.

The new churches soon stopped calling themselves missions. Being seen as a mission was dangerous in Jordan where Muslims were formally denied the right to convert. The Sublime Porte in Constantinople allowed missionaries only to work or build schools in communities with some Christians, and even then only hesitantly. This increased the concentration of missionaries in the few communities where Christians could be found. Moreover, the government exerted pressure on the British embassy to curb the activities of Christian missionaries. Inspired by the Christian missionaries' example and fearing for the religiosity of the Muslim Bedouins in Southern Jordan, who stood out by their flexible view on religion, the Ottoman government even sent Muslim missionaries to teach the lax and aberrant Muslim Bedouins orthodox Sunni beliefs and practices, such as fasting, praying five times a day or going to the mosque.<sup>18</sup> Despite this environment hostile to Christian missionary activity, Anglicans tried to extend their services to those Muslims interested in preaching and Bible readings, and accused the Latins of similar activities to attract the Muslims.

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<sup>16</sup> Jansen 1991, pp. 127-138.

<sup>17</sup> Jansen 1991, pp. 127-38.

<sup>18</sup> Rogan 1999, pp. 157-158.

Both Christians and Muslims were willing to start a discussion with new missionaries. In the missionary reports there are frequent references to the discussions with the local population. But there are as many complaints that the message is not accepted. The villagers decided for themselves what to accept and what not to accept.

## **Reclaiming agency and collective conversion**

A missionary encounter is a two-sided historical process with a decisive role played by the converts.<sup>19</sup> The Jordanians were not passive or reactive recipients of missions, but actually employed missions for their own purpose. Their willingness to come into contact with missionaries was not devoid of political interest either. The Christians of Husn see the missions as being brought in by them, rather than as something imposed on them from the outside. Having a large pool of missionaries available in nearby Palestine to draw from at will, made it easier. The prosperous landowners in Husn regularly crossed the Jordan River to trade wheat against fruit in Palestine, to fetch masons to build their houses, or to visit relatives. These facts facilitated contact with representatives of various churches.

According to Christian spokesmen in the community, one important cause for the conversion of the Greek Orthodox to other Christian churches, was the internal conflicts in the tribe. When a branch split off they refused the further services of the priest belonging to the stem group. The new group 'hired' their own priest in Palestine, preferably from another denomination, as a sign of their separation and newly won autonomy. In the selection of a new priest, the other benefits this mission could offer were also considered. The former mayor of the community told me that, having quarrelled with other families in his tribe, his Greek Orthodox grandfather had left for Jerusalem and brought back the Roman Catholic Italian priest Navoni. The grandfather had found no Greek Orthodox priest willing to come to this remote village, and moreover, he preferred the Catholic mission because it had more money. Navoni brought in teachers from Nazareth, approximately 75 kilometres away, in order to teach both boys and girls. Not only the grandfather, but all the families loyal to him, and all his descendants became Roman Catholics. His grandson, the former mayor who told me this story,

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<sup>19</sup> Comaroff 1991, p. 54.

however, had later converted back to Greek Orthodoxy in order to marry a divorced woman (I will return to this case later).

A similar story was told for the Greek Orthodox tribe of the 'Azar, which due to a family conflict was split in two. The leader of the new branch went to Jerusalem to meet with the Anglican bishop in the St. George Cathedral, who managed to acquire an Anglican mission for them in Husn. Several families collectively converted to Anglicanism. This process can still be traced in the parish register. Of the 57 Anglican families, 52 belong to the clan of the 'Azar, the remaining 5 are all Da'îbis.

In Jordan, where patrilineal kinship still determines the social organisation, tribal or family loyalty frequently supersedes religious loyalty. This fact negates theories that imply an evolutionist progression from religions based on collective ritual practices (such as Greek Orthodox) to somewhat more internalised and individualised beliefs (such as Anglicanism). In these cases of conversion from Greek Orthodoxy to Catholicism or Anglicanism, intrinsic religious notions played a minor role; it was a collective event. Political and kinship allegiance was far more important. In this respect the perspective of the converts differed from that of the missionaries. For the converts, conversion was an instrumental and a relatively unimportant political act, whereas for the missionaries it was preferably an authentic change in belief. The latter continually struggled with the paradox of how to raise the numbers of converts while still guaranteeing the depth of their conversions. The question of sincerity or authenticity, so important for missionaries, was far less important for the converts.

Jordanian Christians resemble Muslims in that their spiritual experience relates more to behaviour, such as going to church, wearing a gold cross, or decorating one's living room with a huge Last Supper poster, than to an inner psychological state. Doubts about one's sincerity are only expressed when observances fall short and one's religion is not evident as a public fact. For example, people never asked me about my beliefs, but they frequently wanted to know why I did not wear jewellery that would publicly state my religion.

Conversion as a materialist endeavour was well known in the local context; in Islam religious rewards have a definite material side and infidels who

take on the faith to avoid special taxes have always been readily accepted. Christians, well aware of the benefits the various missions offered, tried to maximise the material and immaterial benefits the missionaries could bring them. While the borderline between Christianity and Islam was seldom crossed, the borders between the various Christian denominations were easily crossed when it was profitable to do so, either collectively, as the converts to Anglicanism did, or individually. An indication of the frequency of the crossing of denominational boundaries can be found in the archives of the Latin Church. The earliest registers of baptism do not specify conversions, but those from 1910-1913 do. During those four years 49 conversions and one apostasy were counted. It is difficult to find out whether individual conversion was more marked by inward religious transformation than the collective conversion due to tribal politics. However, a further analysis of people's ideas on conversion and of the church registers suggests that marriage politics compete with individualised faith as an important factor in explaining conversion.

## **Marriage practices**

Why did Jordanians convert? When asking people why they or others had converted, the reason most frequently mentioned for individual conversions was that the marriage rules of their own church hindered their marriage preferences. Their stories were similar to that of the above-mentioned former mayor whose whole clan had converted to Roman Catholicism but who had converted back alone and by himself to Greek Orthodoxy in order to marry a divorcee. Rather than obeying the rules and adapting their behaviour, people preferred to stick to their marriage practices and go over to another church with different rules. It was a way of circumventing inconvenient and alien rules. What are these marriage preferences and how should they be understood in this particular socio-economic and Muslim dominated context? How do marriage preferences entice people to embrace another religion?

Muslims and Christians have ideas about marriage in terms of polygamy, marriage gifts, and endogamy. Would this induce conversion from Christianity to Islam or vice-versa? Unlike all Christian churches, Islam allows polygyny. Among Muslims in Jordan, polygyny is not very common and the wider society discourages the practice if it is not under very specific

circumstances, for instance when the first wife is sterile. It is, however, widely thought that the desire to have more than one wife tempts some Christians to become Muslim. Yet, I do not know of any case in Husn where a man became Muslim for this reason. However, one case was recounted of a Christian man who left his wife without divorcing her and went to the city where he lived in a common-law union with another woman.

A remark one commonly hears is that Muslim men marry Christian women in order to avoid paying the *mahr*, a marriage payment from the groom to his bride, nor a *mahr muta'akhhira*, the part of the marriage payment to be paid upon death or divorce as a kind of alimony. Among Muslims the *mahr* is an obligatory part of the marriage contract. Muslim men resent the *mahr* not only because they have to raise a lot of money, but also because it makes them indebted to and thus controlled by the relatives who help them in putting up the money.

Yet, despite such remarks, the *mahr* is no reason for conversion. First, because marrying a local Christian woman would not be cheaper. Although Christians formally deny that they give a *mahr*, the Christian groom does give gifts to his bride similar but of slightly lower value to those given by Muslim grooms. Christian family members are just as anxious to have a say in the marriage as Muslim family members. They arrange their daughter's marriage, just like their Muslim neighbours do. Even if local Muslim men would be allowed to marry local Christian women, their expenses and choking family obligations would not be significantly less. Secondly, a Muslim man who marries a Christian woman does not need to convert. The deprecating remarks on the cheap Christian brides are not part of a discourse on conversion, but an idiom in which young Muslim men voice their complaints about economic and social marriage costs and their resistance to the meddling of kinfolk with their marriage. Used by the elderly, it is a denunciation of those young Muslim men who mix with foreigners abroad or marry a non-Muslim tourist, and refuse to fulfil the obligations of a respectful son. In Husn, some Muslim men have married foreign non-Muslim women, who indeed do not demand a significant *mahr*. The foreign female partner is expected to convert to Islam; the Muslim male partner will not convert to Christianity. However, because of economic securities through the marriage contract, support and surveillance of the two families, and lack of religious congruence between the couple, such marriage ties tend to be weak.

Patrilateral parallel cousin marriage is the ideal, though statistically not dominant, marriage pattern among Jordanians and Muslims and Christians who all share this preference alike. The main reasons for this endogamous preference mentioned in the anthropological literature are control over sexuality and reproduction and continued familial organisation and loyalty.<sup>20</sup> Parental arrangement of the marriage and patrilocality, as are the customs there, are difficult on the bride who has to move into an unknown family. However, when she marries her cousin, whom she knows from childhood, and when she has her father's brother's wife, whom she has visited frequently and who is likely to live nearby, as her mother-in-law, it will be easier for her to adapt. From the perspective of her male kin, who already have to watch over her sexual behaviour, this is easier to do when she is married into their family. It guarantees a better control over her sexuality and thereby their own honour. Moreover, it does not divert the son's loyalty and expenditures on care from kin to affines.

Economic reasons that have been mentioned for the parallel-cousin marriage in the Middle East are to lessen expenditures on bride wealth and to avoid unnecessary fragmentation of the land. Among Muslims, where bride wealth is required as part of the marriage contract, this could be a valid argument. The level of the *mahr* is seen to be related to the mutual trust between the families involved. Brothers are supposed to trust each other and to do their utmost to keep the marriage working. So ideally the *mahr* for a cousin is lower than for an outsider, although in practice it may vary. One can economise even more by directly exchanging brides between families (a *badl* marriage). Then the other marriage rather than the money becomes the insurance for the matrimonial tie, with the unintended consequence that when one marriage goes wrong the other couple has to break up too. Christians do not formally pay bride wealth; religious vows, rather than legally prescribed money, are considered to strengthen the marital tie and to serve as impediment against future divorce. Nevertheless, Christian grooms do give substantial gifts to the bride. By marrying a cousin, Christians could save on the expenditures for the wedding, but I have no data that corroborates the expectation that intra-family marriages are celebrated less extravagantly.

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<sup>20</sup> Eickelman 1981, pp. 129-131.

The second economic reason for endogamy, to keep the landed property within the family, can be more important for Muslims than for Christians. Islamic inheritance laws decree equal parts for all sons, and equal parts for all daughters, with sons inheriting twice the share of daughters. According to Tillion, the adherence to the Islamic rule of female inheritance had led North African people to turn to parallel cousin marriage and the veil as a means to keep the family land together. The land the daughter inherited would be kept within the family if she remained invisible to non-related males and married her cousin.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, for Muslims in the Middle East this is mentioned as one of the foundations of endogamy. Some scholars have rightly objected to this theory arguing that, despite this religious obligation of endowing the daughters, in practice many Muslim women have found themselves disinherited.<sup>22</sup> Christians had even more opportunities than Muslims to use inheritance strategies rather than endogamy to keep the patrimony within the agnatic unit. Most large Christian landowners practised primogeniture, disinheriting the daughters, and sending the younger sons elsewhere for an education or a job. The persistence of endogamy among Jordanian Christians can thus not primarily be attributed to the need for protection of property. However, not all Christians disinherited the daughters; some endowed them equally with their sons. In these cases, the choice of a relative as marriage partner might be economically motivated.

Demographic factors seem to be more important than economic ones in explaining the marriages with kin that do take place among Christians. The practice of excluding younger sons from inheriting the land, contributed to the emigration of many Christian men. While studying or working abroad they often found a foreign wife. This led to shortages of suitable young Christian males on the small, religiously endogamous marriage market of this minority group. The girls, who were less likely to migrate, found it difficult to find a man to marry and many remained unmarried. The parents, anxious to see their daughters married, used the idiom of kinship loyalty to put pressure on the remaining male cousins to choose a bride within the family rather than a strange girl.

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<sup>21</sup> Tillion 1966.

<sup>22</sup> Eickelman 1981, p. 130.

This practice conflicted with the rule in all Christian churches, both the autochthonous one and those brought by the missionaries, that cousin marriage was forbidden. In theory, Christian cousins could jointly convert to Islam in order to get round this marriage prohibition. A much easier option was to select the Christian branch that was most willing to wave this ban or that had found a creative solution to this problem. The Greek Orthodox Church forbade endogamy until 'the fifth forefather', which is about any possible relative. The Roman Catholic Church also disapproved of marriage among relatives, but could grant dispensation under special circumstances. Asking the bishop for dispensation became a standard procedure in Husn. The marriage registers of the Latin Church showed that for 24 per cent of the marriages contracted between 1921 and 1989 dispensation was granted because of kinship. Of all marriages, 15 per cent were between full cousins. The Greek Catholic Church practised a similar dispensation policy. According to its priest, at present about 20 per cent of the marriages are between relatives. These different attitudes to marriage between kin led to an exodus from the strict Greek Orthodox Church to the more lenient Latins and Greek Catholics. If people wanted to marry a cousin they converted and married in another Christian church. To counteract this massive desertion, in 1950 the Greek Orthodox decided to accept a relaxation of the rules and to allow clan endogamy. The Greek Orthodox priest estimates that about 30 per cent of the present marriages are between relatives. In the end all Christian churches adapted their marriage policy to local endogamous practices.

The converts a church could win through its marriage rules, could be lost because of its divorce rules. Muslim men can easily divorce their wives. Christian men, however, are heavily restricted in this respect. In theory, a Christian man who wants a divorce can convert to Islam and then divorce his wife. One man was said to have done so, but when he wanted to reconvert to Christianity in order to marry a Christian woman, the priests refused to reaccept or marry him.

In this situation again, it is far more common for Christians to shift to another Christian denomination. The Christian churches are not united in the restrictions on divorce, although they all claim to be much stricter than Muslims. Latins and Greek Catholics categorically forbid divorce, Greek Orthodox allow it under specific circumstances such as adultery, madness



or a serious infectious disease of one of the partners. Anglican doctrine recognises divorce but according to the present priest it does not allow divorce in the Middle East. Latins, Greek Catholics, and Protestants who wanted to divorce usually turned to the Greek Orthodox Church. A church that did not accept divorce, would neither marry previously divorced people, which is why the former mayor who was a member of the Latin church had to become a Greek Orthodox in order to be able to marry a divorcee.

Why could personal marriage preferences become a more important reason for shifting from one religious group to another, than other possible reasons? In Jordan, as elsewhere in missionary contexts, potential converts were not only attracted by the spiritual rewards, but also by the material benefits offered by the missions, such as education or health care. Elsewhere, I have analysed how the missions competed amongst each other by offering education, and the effect this had on the education of girls in the Middle East or on views about the intelligence of Middle Eastern women.<sup>23</sup> Important to Jordanians were also the missionary contacts with the outside world, and the resulting help with fellowships, jobs abroad – or learning the languages needed for migration – and subsidies. As I have shown in another article, missions were also used as a resource in the power struggle between Muslims and Christians in the community.<sup>24</sup>

Reasons of kinship and marriage were more effective in supporting conversion because educational, material and network benefits could be had without converting. In the Jordanian context in which there was a shortage of convertible Christians, a strong competition between several missions, and a high pressure to prove the donations worth to the benefactors at home, the missionaries were willing to offer any of their services to all who demanded them, without first demanding faithfulness. Benefits, such as access to schools, scholarships, or health care, were open for all. For instance, in this small community, all the main churches – Greek-Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Anglican – and at times also the Greek Catholic and Adventist churches, had schools. The competition between the schools was so fierce that they would accept any pupil, including girls and Muslims. In

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<sup>23</sup> Jansen 1996; Jansen 2004, pp. 7-13.

<sup>24</sup> Jansen 1992.

1912, the Roman Catholic school of the Sisters of the Rosary did not only have 111 Roman Catholic pupils, but also 28 Greek Catholic and 57 Greek Orthodox pupils. Of the total of 196 children, 101 were girls. Later on they also accepted Muslim children. The adopted daughter of the priest of the Evangelical Episcopal Church gave a more recent example of the utilitarian use of the benefits offered by the different missions. She told how she followed primary and secondary school at the Latin school of the Rosary, because the Latin nuns granted her a reduction on the school fees. The Young Women's Christian Association paid for her training as a secretary, and she will continue this training in the United States, with a scholarship of the Mennonites. In short, the inhabitants managed to acquire most of the material benefits without needing to convert.

### **Putting up the fences**

How did the missionary churches react to the ease with which the local population shifted their religious allegiance when this suited their marriage and divorce practices? As can be expected, the churches were far from happy with these crossings over the boundaries. They tried to put up fences for those inside and to open their doors wide for those who wanted to join. They made agreements with other churches to reduce the effects for their community. And in the end they adapted their marriage rules. Their policies had a definite gendered character.

The highest fence is set up between Muslims and Christians. In Islamic doctrine, border rules apply differently for men and women. Muslim men are allowed to marry "people of the book", that is Christian or Jewish women, but Muslim women are only allowed to marry other Muslims. This is related to the notion of the person in Islam. Women are expected to follow the religion of their husbands. This means that if they marry a non-Muslim, they would be lost as a Muslim believer. A man marrying a non-Muslim, however, brings in a new believer and regardless of her faith, his children will be Muslim. Men are therefore accorded more religious autonomy. They are considered to *keep themselves* inside the religious group, while women *have to be kept* in.

This open-door policy to non-Muslim women posed a threat to the Christian minority. It was all the more acutely felt because of the surplus of

marriageable women among Christians, caused by migration and marriage to outsiders by the men. To protect themselves against a potential loss of female souls to the surrounding Muslim community, Christians had as their most effective weapon a strong social control. Mixed Muslim-Christian marriages were, if they did occur among local people, severely punished by ostracism or even murder. All priests denied that Muslim-Christian marriages took place by members of their communities, and the people themselves categorically denied their existence. However, in private I did hear of some cases. Those couples all eloped to escape revenge. In one Greek Orthodox family, the eldest girl married a Muslim man. Her father had died and her eldest brother was too weak to punish her physically, but her family has declared her socially dead. They never speak of her and do not know her whereabouts. They have erased her from the family history. In another case, which occurred in the 1970s, a Roman Catholic girl married a Muslim man and went to live elsewhere. Her brother came to revenge the dishonour to his family and shot her dead. In the ensuing gunfight the brother in turn was shot dead by the husband. Rosenfeld, who studied the mixed Muslim-Christian community of Tur'ân on the West Bank in the 1950s, also noted the near absence of marriages between Muslim men and Christian women. He found only one instance of a Muslim man who eloped with a Christian woman from Haifa.<sup>25</sup> When Jordanian Muslim men marry Christian women, these are nearly all from abroad.

The reverse, Muslim women marrying Christian men, is practically non-existent. Such marriages are equally subjected to strong social disapproval and sanctions. The couple would have to flee the country because such a marriage cannot be legally contracted in Jordan. It is only practically feasible if the man beforehand converts to Islam. This happened in a few cases, but it was usually combined with migration out of town. Rosenfeld mentions two Christians in his village who left for the Lebanon, became Muslims there, and married Lebanese women, later divorcing them and returning to Tur'ân.<sup>26</sup>

The barriers set up to separate the different Christian churches were more easily taken, although also here heavy sanctions were applied. Of the total of 326 marriages contracted in the Roman Catholic Church between 1921 and 1989, 26 per cent were of mixed religious origin. This meant that one

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<sup>25</sup> Rosenfeld 1958, p. 44.

<sup>26</sup> Rosenfeld 1958:44

of the partners originated from another Christian, but never Muslim, denomination, in most cases Schismatic (Greek Orthodox). Until 1961, the non-Catholic partner, usually the woman, had to convert. An exception was made for the case of Catholic Melkites who only had to promise that the children would be educated Roman Catholic. After 1961 conversion was no longer required and the marriage could remain religiously mixed.

## **Conversion and gender**

From the above it must be clear that conversion works differently for men and women. When marriage partners are of a different religion it is the woman who is expected to convert, according to the general principle that “a woman follows a man”. This means that a woman has less religious autonomy than a man. An unmarried woman has to follow the religion of her father and a married woman that of her husband. In the hegemonic ideology of both Muslims and Christians, women are religiously dependent persons, despite the fact that some individual women have a different opinion. The Anglican priest called the principle of women following the men “a biblical rule”.

One effect of this status of women as religious minors is that the churches may lose their female believers when they marry. Religions have therefore developed special rules to keep the female believers in. Islam categorically refuses marriages between Muslim women and non-believers. The Christians, being such a small minority in a Muslim context, would even more strictly enforce religious endogamy on its women, so much so that many women never married. The different Christian churches, each too small to enforce complete endogamy within their church, tried to balance the incoming and outgoing members, by making an agreement that the marriage would take place in the church of the groom. With some exceptions we see this policy reproduced in the few statistics available. Among the marriages of mixed origin contracted in the Roman Catholic Church it mostly were the women who came from other churches. For example between 1944-1954, of the 29 marriages of mixed origin, in 15 cases the bride had another religion and in 9 cases the groom, with six cases unknown.

The fact that some grooms do convert to their wife's religion does not contradict the principle that 'the woman follows the man'. In the context of

arranged marriages it might mean that the bride's father has been able to impose conversion as a marriage condition for his future son-in-law. This occasionally happens when the groom is of another nationality, as in the case of the Egyptian Coptic migrant worker who sought a better living in Jordan, or of another class, like the poor but able-bodied agricultural worker who moved in with his family-in-law because there was no son to take over the family land. Then Conversion is a means of social ascension for the man. Or the groom himself has wanted to change his church for one of the above-mentioned reasons, because he wants to marry a cousin or a divorced woman. A very new, and still very seldom heard argument is that he finds his bride's religion more attractive and converts out of free will for spiritual reasons. Only the last argument is in line with the Pauline notion of conversion as an inward transformation. In general, men would be hesitant to say that they chose their own wife, let alone her religion. To freely choose in both matters means that they openly defy traditional patrilineal loyalties.

Another strategy the churches employed to keep the female believers in, was to put heavy sanctions on the fathers who let them marry out of the church. Under the arranged marriage system, the father formally makes the choice of a partner. So when the bride must follow the religion of her husband, the father was held responsible and he was to blame. During the first half of the twentieth century, the Latin Church followed this line of thought, excommunicating the father for the apostasy of the daughter (or son). This sanction proved counterproductive. Apparently, the threat of excommunication did not prevent fathers from contracting a marriage partner from another religion for their child. There were enough other Christian churches to go to if your own did not want you any more. Moreover, applying this sanction cost the church many souls. In this society organised primarily along lines of kinship, excommunication of the father meant *de facto* excommunication of his whole family. To counteract this loss, the Latin Church was eager to give absolution of excommunication, especially when the father let his next child (now formally belonging to another religion) marry in the church again. While complete figures for absolution of excommunication for the first half of the twentieth century are lacking, the data from 1936 till 1940 gives an indication of the frequency. In this period forty marriages were contracted, of which nine of religiously mixed origin and for these six absolutions of excommunications were given. One may wonder whether these six fathers, and their children, ever considered themselves non-Catholics as the priests did.

## **Gender and the notion of the person**

From the above it is clear that the notion of conversion in the Jordanian context differs from the Pauline model of conversion, which portrays conversion as an act of suddenly seeing the light thanks to divine grace. Believers themselves portray conversion as an instrumental act just as much related to the “benefit system” as to the “belief system”. It fits in with their instrumental and material concept of religion. The Jordanian notion of conversion has its parallel in the Jordanian notion of the person. The concept of an autonomous person, making a decision on the basis of “personal commitment” and “free will” is quite alien in a society where the family is sacred and patriarchal authority still strong. As a result, freely deciding persons seem largely absent in the above context, or it had to be the powerful patriarch who could impose his choice on the whole family or even clan. For those less powerful, loyalty to the family counted more than loyalty to one’s personal religious beliefs.

Subordination to the will of others is most pronounced for young people and for women. In due time men will become heads-of-household and decision-makers themselves after passing through the appropriate life stages. Women remain subject to male authority, although some elder widows are occasionally able to get their way and senior women can exert considerable control on younger women. Both in doctrine and in practice women are often denied the right to choose. Men choose for them, if not the father, then the husband, or brother or son. This objectification and depersonalisation of women, this denial of their reflective self, is best exemplified by the fact that the father is punished with excommunication when the daughter converts. Conversion of women is always explained by referring to the rule that “the woman follows the man”. Never is it said that she just happened to feel more attracted to the other religion. Conversion of individual men is more often seen as their free choice.

This is not to say that women never profited from the decisions of their male relatives. The direct result of the group conversions around the turn of the century was the establishment of several missions that competed with each other through education. Girls’ education thrived in this competitive atmosphere, but education in itself was not enough for them to become an autonomous person. Up to this day female university graduates

find themselves very much limited in their freedom to choose their partner, living conditions or religion.

The depersonalisation of women is part of the dominant gender ideology. But to what extent does it depict actual practice? Especially during the last decades the effective influence of the patriarchal ideology is waning. Mixed marriages do not automatically lead to conversion anymore. Migration has become easier for those who expect difficulties because of religion. Individual women have started to claim religious responsibility. Some Christian girls sought recourse in religion against their parents' wishes by becoming nuns. At present young Islamist women are reclaiming their right to make their personal decisions in religious matters, saying that it is more important to obey God than to obey mortals, meaning their male kin. In doing so, they institute themselves as believers and use this as a source to contradict the patriarchal order.

Europeans sometimes wondered why Muslim women do not convert to a religion that would accord them a better position. Western missionaries judged Islam by its ideas about women, and in the orientalist discrediting of Islam the gender question was prominent. Some missionaries therefore expressed surprise when they found that women were proud to be Muslims and had other ideals about womanhood than those preached by the missionaries. Muslim women seldom seemed eager to convert. This unwillingness should not be attributed solely to the heavy penalty that is set on such actions of women or to their relative lack of religious autonomy. It is more likely that the benefits are hardly worth it. The assumption that women would be better off as Christians must be criticised. Elsewhere I have shown that Muslim women in Jordan pride themselves in several rights and privileges that Christian women do not have, neither legally nor in practice.<sup>27</sup>

The benefits of conversion are not the same for men and women. Conversion for the sake of marriage or divorce mainly benefited fathers and husbands and increased their powers over women. For women, parallel cousin marriage not only meant that they married into a familiar environment, but also that they received less marriage gifts and were more subject to control. A cousin's first right to her prevented that she could indicate her own preferences in the marriage arrangement.

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<sup>27</sup> Jansen 1993.

Also divorce is likely to bring more disadvantages for women than for men. Adultery is the most common ground for divorce accepted by the Greek Orthodox. If the 'great lie' of adultery is used to obtain divorce, men usually come out less scathed than women. If a woman is declared guilty she loses the children and alimony. A divorced woman will also find it more difficult to remarry than a divorced man. A new partner, if he can be found at all, is usually of much lower status. One young Greek Orthodox woman filed twice for divorce, the first time because her husband was disabled and the second time because she proved him to be mad. She was able to get out of a mismatch and enjoys her free status now, but it is unlikely that she will find a new partner and provider. She cleans houses of other people for a living.

## **Conclusion**

In the above it was shown how Jordanian Greek Orthodox Christians made a choice out of the various religions missionaries offered to them. From the literature on missions we know that not only spiritual, but also material and social rewards intervene in this selection from the missionary menu. In this article I have focused on the adaptation of religious practices and beliefs on the basis of local kinship orientations and marriage and divorce practices. Despite their eagerness to differentiate themselves from Muslims, which they often do in terms of women's roles and marriage practices, Jordanian Christians share a strong lineage system and certain marriage preferences with their Muslim neighbours. Rather than giving up their own practices in kinship and marriage, they adapted their religion. They let kin allegiances prevail over religious allegiances, resulting in collective family conversions. On the individual level, they took advantage of the divergence in marriage rules among the different denominations, or of the fact that not each church was as strict in enforcing them. Religion could thus be brought in line with existing practices of kinship and marriage. Moreover, by insisting on their own marriage and divorce practices, relevant within this specific socio-economic, demographic, and political context, the local population indigenised Christianity. They not only fitted their beliefs to their practices by converting to another denomination, but by doing so and by playing the different missionary groups against each other, they also forced the churches to change their rules.



Despite an increasing concern with agency and positionality in the literature on conversion, little has been done to include the gender element. Above it was shown that, due to their different social positions, women and men had different reasons as well as different powers to convert. The boundaries between the churches and the notion of conversion were searched for their gender bias. The ideal definition of conversion as an act of free will, as an authentic experience, or, in the Pauline sense, as an inward transformation, has been criticised before in the light of evidence that in practice conversion takes a wide variety of forms and meanings which can only be understood in the specific contexts and specific power position of the groups and individuals involved. However, little attention has been given to differentiation between women and men, and the gendered character of conversion. This case study has shown that conversion and the ensuing fragmentation of the Christian minority into many small churches was indeed a gendered process. Whereas the collective conversions were usually initiated by a man, individual conversions were more often than not a question of brides following their grooms. While the collective conversions expressed the agency of a powerful man, the individual conversion was more the expression of the lack of religious agency for women. It is only recently that, both among Muslims and Christians in Jordan, women can more openly claim religious agency and their own, separate, religious identity.

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